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⊕Autoweb.com: The Success Story of Two Brothers; It Took Just \$75 to Make It Happen!

Business Wire; New York; Jul 28, 1998; [Business Editors/Automotive & High-Tech Writers](#);

Start Page: 1**Dateline:** CALIFORNIA**Abstract:**

A business that has already permanently changed the history of automotive retail and helped thousands of car dealers nationwide double their profits? Amazingly, brothers Farhang (Frank [Zamani]) and Payam Zamani have done just that! As co-founders of ⊕Autoweb.com, they now have one of the most successful electronic commerce sites on the World Wide Web.

A year later, the story was repeated, as Payam, Frank's younger brother, also left Iran for Pakistan, under similar circumstances. Frank surprised Payam, meeting him on a crowded local train, only two weeks after his brother had entered Pakistan. Astonishingly, Payam was only 16 years old when he left his home in Tehran. Finding the Land of Opportunity

Full Text:

Copyright Business Wire Jul 28, 1998

NOTE TO MEDIA: Photo available on BW PhotoWire/AP PhotoExpress,

PressLink Online and on Business Wire's Web site at

www.businesswire.com

SANTA CLARA, Calif.—(BUSINESS WIRE)—July 28, 1998—Can two brothers coming to the United States with only \$75 in their pockets create a thriving business on the Internet?

A business that has already permanently changed the history of automotive retail and helped thousands of car dealers nationwide double their profits? Amazingly, brothers Farhang (Frank) and Payam Zamani have done just that! As co-founders of ⊕Autoweb.com, they now have one of the most successful electronic commerce sites on the World Wide Web.

Their site, which allows consumers to shop for new or used cars and other automotive products and services online, is growing each day by leaps and bounds. Not only is their company the definitive leader in the fiercely competitive online automotive retail arena, but it also continues to redefine the potential for the overall concept of electronic

commerce.

Today, Autoweb.com is involved in hundreds of millions of dollars of car sales every single month!

Although on the surface this may seem to be one more typical Silicon Valley success story, the reality is anything but. The Zamani brothers' story of escaping religious persecution in Iran and their subsequent arrival in the United States via Pakistan reads like a national bestseller.

They experienced daunting personal challenge and hardship, but overcame them with strong family ties and an amazing determination to rise above adversity.

Their story is also a tribute to the entrepreneurial spirit of commerce in America, where two young brothers arriving with \$75 between them can, with incredible drive and determination, build a multimillion dollar operation within 10 years of their arrival, and eventually go on to change the biggest industry in the United States! Looking for a Better Way of Life

While the odds of succeeding in any competitive business marketplace are limited, for the Zamanis, the odds of merely escaping to America with their lives were even lower.

Frank and Payam Zamani grew up outside of Tehran, Iran, with their parents and sister. Following the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, the quality of life for Iranian citizens sharing the Zamanis' Baha'i religion had declined significantly. The Baha'i community in which the family lived had begun to face growing persecution and pressure to conform both religiously and socially.

Life was very different from the nonoppressive, free-wheeling surge of innovation and investment taking hold thousands of miles away, in Silicon Valley, Calif., during the same period in the mid-1980s.

By the time Frank Zamani, the elder of the two brothers, turned 21 and was about to be drafted into the Iranian army (in which he would have to serve for three years), the family faced a dire decision. A bloody war was raging between Iran and Iraq, and few young men returned from the front.

Rather than stay and fight on behalf of a government that did not provide any rights for him, Frank decided to immigrate to America and leave Iran without a passport, knowing he would be risking his life, and that if he were caught, the punishment would be severe. Leaving with only a few days notice, he fled Iran to Pakistan, guided across the desert by smugglers with other escapees whom he did not know.

The journey took one week under perilous conditions – hiding during most of the daylight hours, fleeing by Jeep in the middle of the night, dressing in the garb of local nomads, and relying on hired escorts who spoke a different dialect and shared no moral, cultural or social values with those fleeing Tehran. Frank barely escaped with his life.

But he did get out of the country and settled temporarily in Pakistan among a community of Iranian Baha'i refugees – others also seeking freedom from the oppression of their homeland and looking for a better way of life.

A year later, the story was repeated, as Payam, Frank's younger brother, also left Iran for Pakistan, under similar circumstances. Frank surprised Payam, meeting him on a crowded local train, only two weeks after his brother had entered Pakistan. Astonishingly, Payam was only 16 years old when he left his home in Tehran. Finding the Land of Opportunity

Reunited, the brothers moved a year later to America, settling in Modesto, Calif. Frank and Payam spoke no English, and together, miraculously, had only \$75 to their name.

After working odd jobs, saving money, learning the language and completing U.S. high school equivalency requirements, Frank eventually entered California State University, Chico, where he studied computer science and received a computer science degree.

Almost simultaneously, his brother, Payam, entered and attended the University of California at Davis, outside of Sacramento, where he obtained a degree in environmental toxicology.

While still going to school, the Zamanis – both ambitious and hard-working, and by now, fluent in English and the American lifestyle – also worked long hours at what would become their future places of employment. Frank put his

computer science degree to work at Pacific Bell and did some consulting on his own, later joining [Microsoft Corp.](#), where he served as an engineer for the Power Point Division.

Both during and following his tenure at U.C. Davis, Payam had the opportunity to gain invaluable business and management experience through his involvement in the Student Works Painting program, a student-run and staffed residential painting franchise network.

Beginning as a summer intern, Payam moved from division manager, generating \$20,000 in profits, to district manager, responsible for recruiting and training other student painters, and eventually to general manager of Northern California operations, where he was responsible for overseeing 700 employees and managing more than \$2.5 million in business!

Through his work with the organization, Payam honed his entrepreneurial skills and acquired the human resources and employee-training expertise that would later become an integral component of [Autoweb.com](#)'s business model. Not surprisingly, 10 of the top performing student employees who worked with Payam at Student Works Painting later joined [Autoweb.com](#) in various capacities.

While both brothers were enjoying successful occupations, the sense of entrepreneurialism and the desire to start a business still resided in the hearts of both Frank and Payam.

Although neither Zamani had any direct experience running a technology company, Frank's personal experience of buying a car when he had first arrived in America and the drive of both brothers to succeed were the only ingredients they needed to create [Autoweb.com](#) in late 1994 in Frank's apartment bedroom in Cupertino, Calif.

Frank's technology background and critical thinking provided the know-how to fuel the site's start up, and a hungry online marketplace provided the consumer interest in the concept of online car buying.

[Autoweb.com](#) went live in April of 1995. During its first week of operation, the site had less than 100 visitors. Today, according to a USA TODAY/Intelligence poll, consumers overwhelmingly have named [Autoweb.com](#) the best car-buying service on the World Wide Web.

The site is involved in more than \$640 million in car sales every month. [Autoweb.com](#) also receives nearly 300,000 customer referrals each month, and has a growing new and used dealer network of more than 4,000 member dealerships throughout the United States and Canada.

"It was difficult coming to an unfamiliar country where we didn't speak the language and where we really had to rise above basic challenges simply in order to survive," said Payam Zamani, co-founder and executive vice president of [Autoweb.com](#).

"But as we grew accustomed to the business environment in this country, we combined our will to succeed with our love of technology and cars to create [Autoweb.com](#). This dream never could have happened if our parents hadn't had the foresight to insist that we leave Iran when we did, and seek a more fulfilling life here in America," concluded Payam Zamani. How [Autoweb.com](#) Works

Where did the idea of [Autoweb.com](#) originate?

"Americans love their cars, but are not necessarily in love with the traditional car-buying process," said Frank Zamani, co-founder and president of [Autoweb.com](#).

"[Autoweb.com](#) offers people who are short on time or find visiting car dealerships stressful an online buying experience that is easy, fast and fun. And through our site, we also provide additional products and services such as financing, insurance and the ability to advertise private cars for sale giving users just about everything for autos on the Web in one place," Frank Zamani added.

In this wired age, new car buyers need never set foot inside a car dealership again -- if they don't want to. Now they can use the [Autoweb.com](#) web site to visit virtual showrooms, where they can enjoy the same services that they'd receive in-person at a car lot -- from inquiring about car availability and pricing, to even scheduling delivery of their newly-purchased car to their home or office -- all from the comfort of their personal computer.

Is it possible for two brothers from a country with a radically different social, cultural and business architecture to

revolutionize a traditional U.S. industry that has seen little or no change in more than 50 years of doing business? The answer is a resounding "Yes." Not only is it possible, but [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com) is hugely successful and offers major benefits for both consumers and dealers.

Online car-buying is here to stay, and [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com) offers a proven model for success that has already redefined the entire automotive industry.

"We've created a new paradigm for car retailing," added Payam Zamani. "[Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com) is simply the best, most affordable way to buy or sell car." Through hard work and the strength of family, [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com) is a true American success story. Background

Founded in November 1994, [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com) (<http://www.autoweb.com>) is the leading online brand for new and used cars, where informed, motivated buyers are put in touch with an exclusive network of the highest-ranking dealers in the United States and Canada.

Using [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com), consumers can inquire about car availability and pricing, secure a loan, compare auto insurance rates, check vehicle recall and service data, or advertise their used auto for sale.

The company has strategic partnerships with [Yahoo!](http://www.yahoo.com), [State Farm Insurance](http://www.statefarm.com), USA Today, Nations Bank, C/NET's Search.com, Netscape Communications, Infoseek, Lycos, and Car and Driver Online, and is a seven-time recipient of PC Magazine's "Hot 100 Web Sites" Award.

Consumers overwhelmingly named [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com) the best car-buying site on the World Wide Web, according to a recent USA TODAY/Intelliquest poll.

For more information, contact [Autoweb.com](http://www.autoweb.com), 3270 Jay Street, Building 6, Santa Clara, Calif. 95054. Telephone: 408/970-9100, Fax: 408/777-9553, Email: info@autoweb.com. SEQN: BW0145

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TECHNOLOGY - THE ROAD RUNNER AHEAD SPURS WEB FUTURISTS' VIDEO FIRM

The Commercial Appeal; Memphis, Tenn.; Apr 12, 1998; McKenzie, Kevin;

Sic:7812Sic:4841

Start Page: C.1

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Subject Terms: Video production

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Modems

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Service introduction

Geographic Names: Memphis

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Abstract:

photo; Caption: By Thomas Busler (Color) Robin Scott watches as Brian Churchill manipulates an image on the Robin Scott Studios Web page. The company is developing use of video images on the Internet.

Full Text:

Copyright Memphis Publishing Company Apr 12, 1998

The day Robin Scott and Brian Churchill have been preparing for is here. Scott is president and Churchill executive producer - and both make up the total staff - of a Memphis television and video production company called Robin Scott Studios. They've been waiting for the day that access to the Internet is fast enough to make video a natural part of the World Wide Web. Technology introduced in the Memphis area this year will start the video revolution on the Internet they've been waiting for, they said. That new technology is high-speed cable modems, a service called Road Runner, offered by Time Warner Communications Mid-South Division. "You can technologically take video, put it on the Internet and actually see it, actually watch it where it looks good," Scott said. "And utilize it for your business so it becomes another broadcast medium for you to advertise with." That advertising could use the same video produced for commercials made for television, he said. Or it could be made-for-Internet video. Unlike television, there are no time limits on the length of an advertising or marketing video on the Internet. The Web also is interactive, multimedia and available around the world. Hotels might offer **virtual** tours to potential guests, real estate companies could show video tours of houses to potential home buyers, car dealers can show their cars to potential **car buyers** and restaurants could show potential diners their food and decor, Scott said. In addition, with high-speed access providing good-quality video, businesses can offer sales and training video on the Internet to customers or employees, he said. Consumers also will find many uses for Internet video, showing, for example, the family wedding to the world, Scott said. Churchill said he sees the day when video entertainment on the Internet will

compete with today's network and cable television shows. Unlike broadcast and cable television networks, anyone could put their video on the Web. "I imagine there will be 'Internetworks' that spring up as a result of this new medium," he said. "It's a new medium, like satellite television, cable or anything else. And as it grows to an acceptable level, there's no reason why it shouldn't start having entertainment channels." The pair are raring to share their vision of the future of video on the Internet because of Road Runner. The cable modem service for computers is being phased in in Shelby County, Memphis and parts of North Mississippi served by Time Warner. It offers the high speeds that make Internet video practical, they said. Time Warner delivers the Road Runner service through the same cable that provides cable television service. Other Internet access providers use telephone networks. Memphis is the 10th market in which Time Warner has launched its cable modem service. Mark Guberman, general manager of Road Runner, said the service in other cities is stimulating Internet uses that take advantage of its higher speed, or greater bandwidth. "What we're starting to see in some of the other cities is as we start introducing cable modems and a critical mass starts using high bandwidth, then content developers start developing content that exploits the high bandwidth," Guberman said. As high-speed Internet access becomes widely available to consumers and businesses in Memphis, Robin Scott Studios is planning to see rapid growth in the use of video on Web sites of local firms. For television production companies, it will be a new market that marries the art of video production with the technology of Internet presentation. Video shot with a camera will be digitized, or made into computer files, for the Web. "In this realm, there are so many hats you wear," Scott said. "You have to have somebody who can produce television, frame shots, edit and understands the tempo and look. Then you have to have somebody who understands computers, and that's been the real jump for a lot of studios." Churchill, 27, provides the technical and artistic skills, Scott said. Scott, 45, provides the business acumen. Both, at different times, were University of Memphis students lured away by job or business opportunities before they received college degrees. Churchill said he'd shot his first film at age 12, using a home movie camera, and left college to start a studio with a partner. Scott said he worked for local radio stations for several years and then ran his own disc jockey business. He ventured into real estate and then television production in the late 1980s. The pair teamed in 1995. One of the studio's local customers is Time Warner. The firm produces commercials shown on Time Warner cable channels, Scott said. Robin Scott Studios has its own Web site, The address is: www.rsstudios.com Churchill said new terms are being coined for television production studios as they become "multimedia producers" or "Internet producers." Memphis will be on the leading edge as local businesses and consumers explore uses for higher speeds on the Internet. "We have this kind of modem speed before a lot of places, and we're going to see things that are not going to happen for a long time in other places," Scott said. "And we, as a video production facility, we're lucky we're ready for that. We've been waiting on it."

Reporter Kevin McKenzie is at 529-2348 or E-mail mckenzie@gomemphis.com

Textual Illustration:

photo; Caption: By Thomas Busler (Color) Robin Scott watches as Brian Churchill manipulates an image on the Robin Scott Studios Web page. The company is developing use of video images on the Internet.

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(PHOTO ONLY) THE VIRTUAL SHOWROOM

St. Louis Post - Dispatch; St. Louis, Mo.; Mar 5, 1998;

Sub Title: [FIVE STAR LIFT Edition]

Start Page: G1

Full Text:

Copyright Pulitzer Publishing Company Mar 5, 1998

[Illustration]

Caption: Color Photo (of a sport utility vehicle) - The **virtual** showroom On the Internet, **car buyers** can now do everything but take a test drive and pick up the keys. Page G3

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Advertising & Marketing; Marketing; Virtual Showrooms Click With Car Buyers

The Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.; Feb 19, 1998; [Johnson, Greg](#);

Edition: Record edition
Start Page: D1
ISSN: 04583035
Subject Terms: [Automobile dealers](#)
[Automobile sales](#)
[Electronic commerce](#)
[Internet](#)
Geographic Names: Los Angeles
CA
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Abstract:

No time wasted driving from dealership to dealership. No sales managers lurking behind the scenes, nudging him to make a deal. Just an easy fact-gathering trip on the Internet and a 15-minute stop at a Cerritos dealership to sign papers and pick up the keys.

Manufacturers, dealers and third-party operators are opening online showrooms as they rush to join the growing digital marketplace. Web sites like Microsoft's CarPoint are challenging distribution systems set in place by auto industry giants such as General Motors--which has opened its own Web site, BuyPower, where customers can set a new-car deal in motion.

Manufacturers are trying to calm dealers' fears, arguing that Web sites like GM's BuyPower and Chrysler Corp.'s Get a Quote are really designed to serve dealers by creating a less-expensive way of steering real customers rather than tire-kickers onto their showroom floors.

Full Text:

Copyright Times Mirror Company Feb 19, 1998

Jerry Carver smiles as he tells of buying a maroon 1997 Toyota Camry over the Internet.

No time wasted driving from dealership to dealership. No sales managers lurking behind the scenes, nudging him to make a deal. Just an easy fact-gathering trip on the Internet and a 15-minute stop at a Cerritos dealership to sign papers and pick up the keys.

Carver's experience provides a glimpse into an ongoing evolution in the country's \$1-trillion business of buying and selling automobiles.

Consumers can now wander into virtual showroom floors around the clock--gathering information about competing models and requesting guaranteed price quotes from dealers.

They can apply for financing and insurance, check out accessories and contact consumer-oriented guides that promise to deliver inside information on the real cost of new cars and trucks. Consumers need leave home only to test drive the vehicles or pick up the keys.

The rapidly evolving world of online commerce is forcing dealers and manufacturers to reassess their roles in a world where consumers can use home computers to strike online deals without ever visiting a showroom.

Consumers are no longer dependent upon dealer showroom salesmen for answers to questions ranging from, "Does it come in red?" to "How many pound-feet of torque will it deliver at 3,500 RPMs?"

And, for an industry that's accustomed to controlling the flow of information, "this is nothing less than a structural power shift for manufacturers," said J. Ferron, a partner in charge of Global Automotive Practice at Coopers & Lybrand. "They're being forced to enter into a two-way dialogue."

Manufacturers, dealers and third-party operators are opening online showrooms as they rush to join the growing digital marketplace. Web sites like [Microsoft's CarPoint](#) are challenging distribution systems set in place by auto industry giants such as [General Motors](#)—which has opened its own Web site, BuyPower, where customers can set a new-car deal in motion.

Though Internet sales now account for a fraction of all new cars sold, many dealers fear that the Net could one day force them out of business or reduce them to mere order takers.

A new poll by Agoura Hills-based consulting firm J.D. Power & Associates indicates that just 10% of dealers view the Internet as a positive development; almost half view the Internet as a threat to their survival.

"A lot of these dealers are afraid of the future because they don't think they can make it," said Payam Zamani, co-founder of [Autoweb.com](#), a Santa Clara-based Internet brokerage.

Manufacturers are trying to calm dealers' fears, arguing that Web sites like GM's BuyPower and Chrysler Corp.'s Get a Quote are really designed to serve dealers by creating a less-expensive way of steering real customers rather than tire-kickers onto their showroom floors.

Manufacturers envision their still-evolving Web sites as tools to fend off competition from savvy retailers such as [AutoNation](#), which is building a nationwide dealership chain that markets cars in much the same way that apparel, electronics and appliances are sold.

"With BuyPower, {dealers} can have the look and feel of a sophisticated {nationwide} retailer without all of {the} infrastructure costs," said Ann Pattyn, manager of GM's Thousand Oaks-based consumer marketing operation, which developed BuyPower. "And our individual dealers can also use technology to better compete."

*

CarPoint and BuyPower are targeted directly at consumers such as Homer Porter, who once spent a miserable afternoon trying to wring a \$75 price cut from an auto showroom salesman.

Last fall, the Pasadena pharmacist drove away from his first online adventure in a 1997 Ford Explorer. Brokered by CarPoint, the deal included a price that was just slightly higher than the dealer invoice, and Porter vows he'll never again do business directly with a dealer.

Internet proponents say frustrated motorists are hungry for options other than buying directly from dealers. In 1997, J.D. Power reports, nearly 3 million consumers turned to auto clubs, credit unions and other car-buying services.

Online deals didn't exist five years ago, but by 1997, nearly half of all brokered new-car sales were initiated online by companies such as Irvine-based Auto-By-Tel.

[Find/SVP](#), a New York-based market research firm, reports that only 2% of 15 million new-vehicle sales and 33 million used-vehicle sales were consummated over the Internet in 1997. But the firm is predicting that 25% of sales will be initiated electronically by 2000.

The dramatically increasing number of American households with Internet connections is expected to drive rapid growth of online deals.

Chase Manhattan Bank now processes car-loan applications electronically and Geico Inc. uses e-mail to handle insurance requests. Barnett Bank recently opened an online subsidiary to sell leased cars returned by its customers.

Irvine-based Kelley Blue Book and Beverly Hills-based Edmund Publications are adding Web sites where consumers can check car prices. Even the public radio hosts known as Click and Clack, real-life Boston car mechanics Tom and Ray Magliozzi, operate an auto-related Web site.

Many of these sites are designed to give consumers one-stop shopping—where customers can check prices, buy insurance, arrange financing and buy a car.

"People want product information, pricing, finance, insurance and the rest," said Stephen Hanson, marketing director for Kelley Blue Book. "And they want it all in one spot."

Not surprisingly, even as Internet commerce blossoms, consumers are bumping into the online equivalent of slick salesmen in loud sports jackets. Chat rooms are starting to buzz about electronic versions of bait-and-switch tactics, in which brokers and dealers lure consumers in with the promise of low prices—and then try to sell them on more expensive cars with fatter profit margins.

"[Internet] services aren't always providing customers with what they want," said Tom Libby, a director at J.D. Power. "Frequently, consumers are being asked to come in to the dealer to get a price—which puts them right back where they were. One reason consumers use these services is they want to avoid having to come into the dealer at all."

Experts caution that deals on the Internet aren't necessarily better than those negotiated face to face. Some consumers who have tried the Internet are heading back to dealers.

"I don't mind driving all day if it'll save me a grand," one chat-room participant wrote. "At least I can avoid the feeling of being ripped off {online}."

Critics of online dealing say there are built-in expenses that can add to costs. Online dealers generate a profit by charging dealers as much as \$3,500 per month to steer buyers to them. Autoweb.com last week broke ranks, however, with a new pricing strategy that charges dealers only when hot prospects are delivered.

*

If consumers aren't quite sure what to make of the Internet, they're in good company.

GM shook up its dealer ranks in October when it offered this blunt explanation for setting up a Web site now operating in the Western states: "People have been less than enthusiastic about shopping for a new car," it says on its BuyPower site. "The combination of looking and negotiating could easily get discouraging."

Many dealers view the company Web sites with suspicion because manufacturers have "a history of coming up with promotion ideas that don't work and asking dealers to throw in the money," said Ron Claudon Jr., an Auburn, Wash., dealer who applauds GM's site.

Claudon, among the few dealers who have embraced the Internet, argues that BuyPower will help his dealership generate cost-effective sales leads without having to pay stiff monthly fees to online competitors. "GM is not simply sitting back and seeing where the Internet is going to end up," Claudon said. "They're going on the offensive."

Dealers who align themselves with GM and Chrysler's online marketing programs are betting that the sophisticated sites will, in effect, create powerful national brands like those used by thousands of independent hardware stores to compete against huge warehouse-style operators. They figure dealers who sign on early will be among the survivors.

"GM spends hundreds of millions of dollars on advertising every year to communicate to our customers, and no dealer can do that sort of thing alone," said Mike McLean, president of Tustin-based McLean Cadillac, Olds, GMC.

"And everything I know about the Internet says that you have to be there, no matter what it's going to cost."

And, some industry analysts say, dealers who learn to harness the marketing potential of the Internet could actually bolster profitability. "They can concentrate on selling things like insurance, accessories, repair services, used cars and financing, all of which have better profit margins than new cars," said Herbert Tay, an industry consultant with A.T. Kearney in Costa Mesa.

Yet, even as dealers fashion their long-term online strategies, they're struggling to reprogram analog salespeople for the digital age. J.D. Power's Libby notes that some car salespeople wait days before calling back prospects who clearly are ready to buy a car or truck.

"The hardest part is getting them to recognize that e-mail is like a phone call," Claudon said. "Some of these guys can't even type."

"And if {someone} messages you saying he has 50 grand in his pocket and he wants to buy a couple of cars, are you going to wait till next week to call him back?"

PHOTO: Jerry Carver of Long Beach shopped for his 1997 Toyota Camry on the Internet and saved time.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: After gathering auto information on the Internet, Jerry Carver picked up his car at a nearby dealership.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Web site of Click and Clack radio hosts Tom and Ray Magliozzi.; PHOTO: Irvine-based Auto-By-Tel offers brokered new-car sales via computer.

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Good times and bad on the Web

Network World; Framingham; Feb 19, 1996; [Borsook, Paulina](#);

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[Success](#)
[Real estate companies](#)
[Problems](#)
[Commercialization](#)
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[Automobile dealers](#)

Classification Codes: 9190: *US*
9110: *Company specific/case studies*
8390: *Retail stores, includes groceries*
8360: *Real estate industry*
5250: *Telecommunications systems*

Geographic Names: US
Companies: [DealerNet](#)
[Casitas Village-Carpinteria CA](#)

Abstract:

Internet business winners have found that success does not lie in high-end technology platforms, but in delivering better value, meaningful information, or service to specific markets. Internet business losers are those who discover that the medium is not easy to exploit and does not guarantee a quick return. DealerNet, the **virtual** Automobile Row, is succeeding as an on-line business because the service makes it easy for potential **car buyers** to seek out the information they want on cars and dealerships. DealerNet, a cooperative advertising network, has signed on more than 100 US automobile dealers that pay monthly fees, plus initial setup charges, for visibility through the DealerNet Web site. The Casitas Village housing association of Carpinteria, California, has abandoned its venture into the Web. The association's management saw no clear return on its investment after a period of several months, although there was great untapped potential to reach Web users looking for coastal real estate in Southern California.

Full Text:

Copyright Network World Inc. Feb 19, 1996

[Headnote]

What makes for a successful electronic commerce venture? Here's what two companies learned by bringing their businesses on line.

There's a certain old-fashioned comfort in knowing that it's not technology alone that makes for business success on the Internet.

Internet winners have found that success doesn't lie in high-end technology platforms, but in delivering better value, meaningful information or services to specific markets. And Internet business losers - they're out there, despite the hype - are those who discover that the medium is not easy to exploit and doesn't guarantee a quick return.

A clear winner

From its earliest research and development days, the Internet has worked superbly as an information resource - a tool that lets people make active choices about the information they wish to obtain. So it's no surprise that DealerNet, the Seattle-based virtual Automobile Row, is succeeding as an on-line business because the service makes it easy for potential car buyers to seek out the information they want on cars and dealerships.

DealerNet, a cooperative advertising network, has signed on more than 100 U.S. automobile dealers that pay monthly fees ranging from \$495 to \$695, plus initial setup charges of \$1,495 to \$2,495, for visibility through the DealerNet site. Compare that to the minimum \$10,000 per month dealers might pay for newspaper advertising. The DealerNet service allows consumers to look at pictures of new cars and grab automobile specifications. For example, DealerNet users can ask the service to generate a list of cars with certain technical specifications - say, convertibles with cylinder engines - or within a certain price range.

They also can be linked to the closest dealer offering the car they want. Users get the dealer's phone number, URL, electronic mail and street address, and in some cases, a map of the dealer's location.

Making good use of World-Wide Web hyperlink technology, DealerNet offers information with lots of granularity. For example, users clicking on a horsepower button are not only shown the specifics for a particular vehicle, but also the horsepower average for that class of car and the high- and low-horsepower vehicles within the class.

DealerNet has always invested heavily in links throughout the rest of the Web - with access from Infoseek, America Online, Global Network Navigator, Internet Life, The Microsoft Network, Sight-Seeing Guide and Hotwired. With this multiplicity of cross-references, it's easy for Internet surfers to find DealerNet.

DealerNet also is creating forums and chat areas for car buyers, because 'Net users have always liked to share experiences and opinions, as well as information. And a savvy 'Net business such as DealerNet will honor that tradition. The service makes its Web site a place for anyone who wants to talk about comparison shopping for new cars.

DealerNet runs on Silicon Graphics, Inc. (SGI) servers - a natural for a graphics-intensive service displaying pictures of new cars - and uses the National Center for Supercomputing Applications' Web server software. Unlike more static sites, where the visitor's experience is defined well in advance, most of DealerNet's Web pages are built on-the-fly.

When a DealerNet user is interested in a Mazda Miata, for instance, the SGI servers craft a custom Web page, pulling together data about the sports car with contact information about the closest dealer.

Pete Wilson, DealerNet operations manager, says the company has been careful to offer acceptable performance for customers with only 14.4K bit/sec modems. But DealerNet's peak usage is during the business day, and customers typically have higher speed access to the site.

A defining experience DealerNet was started in 1994 by Marty Rood, a Seattle-based dealer of Nissans and Volvos, after he attended a conference on the Internet at the University of Washington and spent some time with the folks at Spry, Inc.

The start up was later purchased by Reynolds and Reynolds Co. of Dayton, Ohio, which holds 90% of the market for paper forms used by automobile dealers. More important, the Midwestern company is the biggest provider of information technology products and services to auto dealers.

Although DealerNet is not yet linked to the SGI workstations that reside in all Reynolds and Reynolds client-automobile dealerships, there are plans afoot to make those connections.

Once these islands are linked, buyers will have easy access to all information about an automobile dealer. Through the Internet, customers will be able to check on the status of a car repair, for example, or inquire about the availability of parts.

The dealers that sign up with us are very progressive and consumer-oriented. The ones that think they can keep selling cars like they always have will be out of business in 10 years," says DealerNet's Wilson. As part of its service, DealerNet offers virtual domain hosting - giving dealers their own Internet domain name, such as "Saturn DealerInMadison.Corn" - and augments marketing materials the dealers may have developed for other media.

The service helps each dealer craft its image, whether elegant (as for the largest Lexus dealer in the world) or more cost-conscious ("Some Ford dealers are really duking it out over Explorer prices.").

At this point, DealerNet officials are more concerned with creating mind share and market share than maximizing profit. While founders Rood and Wilson did well when they were bought out by Reynolds and Reynolds, both they and their parent know that the real returns will come later on, as the "Net matures as a marketplace. For new Dealers Net offers dealers a novel advertising medium at a fraction of the cost.

By establishing itself as the national car-buying location on the Internet - a service that grew out of the founders' off-'Net expertise - the company is likely to reap big profits as Internet use grows.

A thoughtful loser But for every winner at the game of business on the 'Net, there also are losers who have not been able to capitalize on their markets. The Casitas Village housing association of Carpinteria, Cali, the fifth largest housing association in Santa Barbara County, has abandoned its venture into the Web. The association's management saw no clear return on its investment after a period of several months, although there was great untapped potential to reach Web users looking for coastal real estate in Southern California. There also was the opportunity to form a marketing consortium with the other 150,000 homeowner associations in the U.S. Robert Ooley, who is also an IT officer for Santa Barbara County, was the force behind the abandoned Web site and envisioned it serving a number of useful purposes, including providing an information resource for Casitas Village property owners; acting as a marketing tool to attract new buyers; and helping to build up the development's image.

"Lots of our owners are out of county, out of state and out of the country, and some of our off site owners are very computer savvy," Ooley says. The Web site would have enabled them to keep tabs on the housing association and their property.



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A tale of two sites

The Web site also would have enabled Casitas Village to mark out its identity on the Web as a resource for those interested in high-density living that is, those interested in apartments, condos and residences other than single-family houses on individual parcels of land.

"There are [Web] sites for architects and planners, but not the end users," who are the homeowners themselves, Ooley says. At a time when there is a national oversupply of high-density developments, Casitas Village would have been able to brand itself as a leader in service by providing authoritative information on the Web.

In short, Ooley hoped the very existence of the Web site would make Casitas Village appear to be more desirable - more up-to date, better managed and better maintained. And with this enhancement of the development's image, its property values might have appreciated in the slumping Southern California real estate market. Ooley also wanted to use the site as a way to speed up internal business operations and improve communications. The association's attorney and its accountants, for example, already had E-mail, so closing the loop and bringing everyone on-line made good business sense.

But Ooley and the housing association foundered on the obstacle that many small businesses encounter on the 'Net: There was no immediate return on investment. The organization couldn't translate its spending on the Web

into hard dollars from sales of new units, for example.

What's more, Ooley ran smack into another problem that bedevils those trying to make commercial use of the 'Net: The association's business processes did not easily lend themselves to the Web. For example, he envisioned owners becoming more informed and involved in the operation of the development by being able to peruse information about the association's business meetings. But the business office was not accustomed to typing up the minutes of a monthly board meeting until just before the next meeting.

This lack of timeliness made the investment in technology seem superfluous, even extravagant. And timeliness never became a priority for the business. Perhaps because the Web site was asked to prove its worth in too short a time and was not narrowly focused - after all, Ooley was hoping to serve existing property owners, potential property owners and the Internet community at large - management ceased funding the site three months after it went up.

Unlike DealerNet, where the business was willing - and funded - to take the long view and returns weren't expected to be immediate, the association's management demanded a short-term payoff. But that long term view may be a luxury small businesses can't afford. Many simply may not be able to justify the cost of establishing a Web presence. What's more, the value of image advertising and improved customer service - prime goals for many Web undertakings - are always difficult to quantify, whether on the Internet or off. When every dollar counts for a small business, the intangibles of 'Net business simply may not add up. For now, that is. In the near future, businesses may come to see doing business on the Internet as natural and as necessary as listing themselves in the phone book or having an 800 number. *

[Author note]

San Francisco-based Borsook (loris@well.com) has work appearing in Wired, New week Japan and an upcoming Seal Press anthology on women and cyberspace.

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The virtual car buyer

Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine; Washington; Sep 1995; Henry, Ed;

Volume: 49**Issue:** 9**Start Page:** 145**ISSN:** 1056697X**Subject Terms:** Online information services
Automobile sales**Abstract:**

Henry describes how he used on-line services to get as much information as he could on purchasing a new car. A huge benefit of using the computer to buy a car is the incredible amount of information that can be accessed.

Full Text:

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Surf the World Wide Web or any of the on-line services and you're inundated with information about cars--news, reviews, bulletin boards, carmakers' home pages, safety recalls, classified ads, and even outfits that promise to help you select a car, locate a dealer that has it in stock, set up the vehicle-financing and deliver the vehicle to your door.

The prospect of buying a car from the comfort of your home computer is tantalizing when you consider that the typical car buyer goes to the library to read up on new cars and schleps from dealer to dealer before getting serious about negotiations--only to be forced to play time-consuming haggling games and arrange for financing and insurance for the car.

But as anyone who has surfed the on-line services knows, the hype is often laid on thick. Can you really go through the entire car-buying process with a keyboard, mouse and modem? And if so, can you possibly get a good deal?

As auto editor of Kiplinger, I was assigned to find out. Of course, my editors wouldn't actually give me \$20,000 or \$30,000 to buy a new car. I would simply take the search as far as I could and report the results.

I own a 1988 Jeep that has held up well over the 80,000-plus miles I've driven it. So for this story, I decided to "buy" the logical replacement for my car: a Jeep Grand Cherokee. In mid July the 1996 models weren't available yet, so my virtual-shopping expedition was for a 1995 Jeep. It was late in the model year, so I figured I could cut a good deal.

First mission: Identify the on-line resources that are most useful. As I browse the screens of the major on-line services, there is no dearth of companies offering to help buy a car. Some are manufacturers, others are dealerships, and still others are buying services that specialize in hand-holding consumers through the process.

ⓂAmerica Online (keyword: automobile, car or cars) has the weakest offerings—mostly car magazines. ⓂProdigy (jump: automobiles, car or cars) and ⓂCompuServe(go: automotive) offer reviews, new-model information from the car manufacturers, bulletin boards and services that help you choose and locate a car.

If I hadn't had a specific model in mind, I could have used one of the on-line car-buying services to identify vehicles that matched the criteria I supplied. AutoNet, on ⓂCompuServe, allows you to specify a body style, price, safety features and other criteria, and then searches its data base for vehicles that match. The search is free, but you pay for information on each model. The Automotive [information Center runs AutoNet on ⓂCompuServe; it also runs AutoNET on ⓂProdigy, but there you can only download prices and stats on new cars.

I want to confirm my choice of the Grand Cherokee by checking reviews, test drives, and its safety and repair record. A number of car magazines on-line have reviewed it at one time or another, including Automobile on ⓂCompuServe; Car and Driver and Road & Track on ⓂAOL; and Consumer Reports on all three services. Checking these publications on-line for references to the Grand Cherokee is a breeze. All have text-search functions and group vehicle reviews in one place. Car and Driver rates the Grand Cherokee Laredo best over the Chevy Blazer LT and Ford Explorer XLT. So I further narrow my search to the Laredo.

From there I go to the World Wide Web on the Internet, which I access through ⓂAOL, but which is available via any of the on-line services. Browsing the popular search engines on the Web—Yahoo (<http://www.yahoo.com>), WebCrawler (<http://webcrawler.com>) and Web Worm <http://www.cs.colorado.edu/home/mcbryan/www.html>)—I come up with three more stops for my research.

Popular Mechanics magazine's PM Zone (<http://popularmechanics.com>) allows me to search for brief reviews by model. Edmund's ([gopher://gopher.eneds.com/11/showroom/edmunds/newcars/mainnew](http://gopher.gopher.eneds.com/11/showroom/edmunds/newcars/mainnew)) includes government crash tests (the Cherokee earned a respectable four stars out of five). And a company called Alldata Corp. (<http://www.alldata.tsb.com>) lists the technical bulletins issued by the car companies. I can view a list of problems the Jeep has had over the past few years and read brief descriptions of them, which will give me clues to the quality of the newer models.

If I want to read the detailed bulletins, I have to download software and, after ten free minutes, pay \$10 per model looked up. But I don't bother because the list for the 1995 Jeep contains nothing serious—an account of squeaks and rattles in the headrest and undercarriage of the vehicle. Nothing I read persuades me that the Jeep is the wrong choice.

I can also sign on to one of the bulletin boards or forums available on ⓂCompuServe or ⓂProdigy to chat with other owners and learn about their experiences. On the automotive bulletin board on ⓂProdigy, someone had posted a question about reliability problems with the Grand Cherokee; no one who responded had experienced any major problems.

ZEROING IN ON THE PRICE

Next I log on to ⓂProdigy, which has the biggest selection of buyers' groups, and select the "New Vehicles" icon to scan the list of carmakers' "showrooms"—essentially online ads because they're maintained by the manufacturers. The Jeep isn't listed, so I browse Consumers Car Club (a buying service), Auto-By-Tel, which promises to get you the "wholesale" price from a local dealer, and AutoNET, which promises new-car prices and specs. Then I toggle to AutoVantage and decide to start there because of its \$1 three-month trial offer. (One hour of connect time is free, but then you pay \$6 per hour. The catch is, if I forget to cancel after that time, I will have to pay the \$49 annual fee.)

Signing up gets me an identification number and an access code that I can use to download prices. I call up AutoVantage by modem and download the Jeep's prices. Jeep is one of 77 makes of cars and trucks listed by the company. I get a write-up of the Jeep's performance, too.

I also download prices for \$4 from ⓂProdigy's AutoNET. On ⓂCompuServe's AutoNet I pay \$1.50 for the AutoNet Vehicle Data Sheet, which has sticker prices, dealer invoice and a complete list of specifications and options. And I pay \$1.50 for the AutoNet Decision Maker, basically a reader's guide to the Jeep Grand Cherokee with summaries of articles on it going back to 1993.

I switch to the Car Price Network on the Internet (<http://www.w2.com>), which will sell you up-to-date invoice prices for \$7 per car plus a \$4 total transaction charge for all reports you order. Instead, I look up Jeep prices in Edmund's. You can print out the dealer and retail prices for 39 makes of domestic and foreign cars for no charge other than

the cost of the time you spend downloading the information.

The Jeep I want—I've decided to go for a dark-green Jeep Grand Cherokee Laredo equipped with a discounted "quick-order option package"—carries a suggested retail price of \$26,206 and an invoice price of \$23,786, according to all sources except AutoVantage, whose invoice price is \$55 more than the rest. (I never figured out why.)

Perhaps the single most important factor in shopping for a car, whether it's done on-line or on foot, is the target price. I want a price that is fair to me and the dealer. So before leaving Edmund's I check the "dealer holdback" for Jeep Grand Cherokees. The holdback represents a discount for the dealer taken off the invoice price, reflecting the true wholesale price. In the case of the Jeep, the holdback is 3%. That means the actual price of the car is around \$23,072, or \$714 less than the \$23,786 invoice price. I know from past experience that the average dealer markup on new cars is 6.7%. So I bump the discounted invoice price up 6%, to \$24,457. That becomes my target price. Now I have to find a dealer who'll accept my price.

DEALING WITH THE DEALER

The best way to locate a dealer on-line is to head straight for the Internet. My earlier search of the Web had led me to four prominent automobile dealer networks: AutoNetwork in Virginia (<http://www.cbo.com/auto/index.html>); yet another Autonet, in Southern California (<http://www.deltanet.com/autonet>); AutoWeb in the San Francisco area (<http://www.autoweb.com>) and DealerNet in Washington State (<http://www.dealernet.com>).

I sign on to AutoNetwork because it is the biggest dealer network serving the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. I check the inventories of AutoNetwork's member dealerships and see a listing of more than 4,100 cars, of which 49 are Jeep Grand Cherokees. Sport Jeep/Eagle is one of the dealerships listed on AutoNetwork. Using a standard "Internet Business Reply" card I find at the Web site, I identify myself, describe the car I'm looking for, and tell them I have set a target price of \$24,457. Then I fire off the e-mail to Sport's on-line contact, Eric Rohrer. I also send an e-mail to South Tacoma Jeep/Eagle in Washington State. South Tacoma is part of DealerNet and specializes in on-line orders.

Then I stumble onto AutoMall Online (<http://www.automall.net>), also located in Virginia. The mall is a recent addition to the Internet and, as with other on-line malls and auto networks, which operate in a manner similar to buying services, is set up to accept requests on-line and relay them to participating dealers. The difference with an on-line mall is that the dealer, not the buying service, states the price, so the buyer has more wiggle room. And with on-line malls, there typically aren't any extra fees, as there are with buying services.

I contact the AutoMall soon after contacting AutoNetwork and DealerNet, and within two hours receive e-mail from Jesse Seay, a salesman at Montrose Jeep/Eagle in Germantown, Md. Seay says my price "seems reasonable," and he might have a car to meet my needs. But he wants to check and will fax me the details and the price.

CLOSING THE DEAL

Within hours of the quote from Seay, Rohrer of Sport Jeep/Eagle responds to my query. He would be willing to sell me a \$26,206 Jeep for \$24,457. Seay's quote comes in at \$24,732 or a car with a retail price of \$26,818.

The figures look good, considering there's no haggling involved. Is there room to negotiate over price? "Sure, we could do all of that over the phone," says Seay. At that point, I'm tempted to accept when (whoops) I realize this is only an exercise.

As it turns out, I could have had the car by the end of the day. "If the car is not what we said it would be," says Seay, "you'd always have the first right of refusal"—that is, no obligation to accept the car.

Once we agreed on a price, I would have had to give the dealership a \$500 deposit (charged to my credit card), a completed credit application and a copy of my driver's license. It would be a clean deal with a fax machine because the signed papers could be exchanged with ease. Using a fax modem would require a facsimile signature on the computer for the electronic mail. I'd sign anything else—along with the purchase order, odometer statement and title application—when the car was delivered to the house. Sport Jeep/Eagle would have done the same. As for the DealerNet dealership in Washington State, it took several days to respond to my e-mail. But it would have met my price and delivered the car to me for an additional \$450.

Montrose Jeep/Eagle would have provided financing, too. And if I had done some comparison-shopping, I would

have gotten a competitive rate. "Usually what we're doing is trying to shop a rate competitively to match a rate the customer has or do a little better if that's what it takes to close the deal," says Seay. Comparison-shopping for financing can be done on-line, too. ⓈProdigy and ⓈCompuServe have limited information about manufacturers' financing. On the Internet, ⓈTime Warner's Pathfinder (<http://pathfinder.com>) has the top car-loan rates in 100 metro areas, based on surveys conducted by HSH Associates.

One last thing: I would have had to show any dealership proof of insurance before picking up the car. For most people, that means contacting their insurance company and getting an okay for the new vehicle. You usually have to use the telephone to do that.

POST MORTEM

One undeniable benefit of using your computer to buy a car is the voluminous library of on-line resources you can access, making you smarter and better prepared to strike a good deal.

You probably don't need as much information as the on-line services offer. At some point you start to feel overload, and what seems like an easy solution to researching a car can turn into hours of reading and wading through the many documents the companies offer. Meanwhile, the meter is running for all the minutes you spend on-line.

As for buying, you can't beat the convenience. You can complete the entire process from your office or from home while you're babysitting the kids--theoretically, in a single day. I suspect I could have talked the price down had I been sitting in the showroom with the dealer. I know the moves and the ploys that dealers use, and I've got a few of my own.

How do dealers feel about cyber car-buying? "I like to meet people face to face and enjoy trying to make a deal across the desk," says Seay. "You have a better chance of establishing a rapport with the customer than when you're communicating via computer." Which may be another way of saying that the dealer also feels better able to keep negotiations in check--and sell rustproofing, fabric protection and other money-makers--when facing off with you.

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Taking a virtual route to a test drive;Car 95

The Times; London; Jun 10, 1995; [Kevin Eason](#);

Start Page: 1

ISSN: 01400460

Abstract:

*Try the ultimate test drive: a trip to the beach without leaving the showroom. Ford yesterday revealed the Galaxy system that will transport potential **car buyers** to the world of **virtual** reality. Instead of poring over brochures, customers simply strap on a headset and go for an imaginary drive.*

Full Text:

Copyright News International Newspapers Ltd. Jun 10, 1995

Try the ultimate test drive: a trip to the beach without leaving the showroom. Ford yesterday revealed the Galaxy system that will transport potential **car buyers** to the world of **virtual** reality. Instead of poring over brochures, customers simply strap on a headset and go for an imaginary drive.

They watch virtual pedestrians, admire the virtual scenery, turn on the virtual radio and open or shut virtual electric windows with their virtual hand. At the same time, they can choose the colour of the upholstery and change around the rear seats of the seven-seater people carrier.

The company has been testing eight of the Pounds 35,000 virtual reality simulators at county shows and exhibitions. They will now be installed in showrooms as dealers discover they do not need to stock large numbers of the real thing when they can use the simulator to show customers what they are buying. Uschi Englert, the Ford executive co-ordinating the Galaxy launch in Britain, says: "The feedback we are getting from customers is very positive." Virtual reality could go even further, for Ford is planning to test simulators on which to train mechanics. The headset picture could guide trainee mechanics around the inner workings of the engine compartment without them getting a single oily thumbprint on the paintwork. "That is something we are keen on," says Ms Englert. "We can take mechanics into the closest detail by computer."

The Galaxy software took four months to programme by designers from the Virtually Group in London and IBM, which is manufacturing the system at Greenock, Scotland. Photographs of the Galaxy were scanned and digitised into computer form so that everything seen through the headset reflects the exact dimensions and layout of the vehicle. Customers sit in a seat taken from the front of a Galaxy and don a lightweight headset with handset, which manipulates an imaginary on-screen hand.

Then a virtual chauffeur takes them on an imaginary four-minute ride, through town and country, even avoiding an errant virtual truck which pulls out in front of the Galaxy.

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